

TRAILS FAQs

DISCOVER ANSWERS TO SOME INTERESTING FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE OREGON TRAIL!

What is the Oregon Trail?

In its earliest days, the Oregon Trail was a 2000 mile long string of rivers and natural landmarks that could be followed from Missouri to Oregon. It was easy to get lost without a guide who knew the way. In later years, after thousands of pioneers had followed the Oregon Trail to settle in the Oregon Country, there were well-worn paths to follow. On the other hand, there were also local roads, military roads, and even shortcuts, so while it was harder to get really lost, it was still easy to take a wrong turn.

Where did the Oregon Trail begin and end?

Well, that depends on how you look at it. Officially, according to an act of Congress, it begins in Independence, Missouri, and ends in Oregon City, Oregon. To the settlers, though, the trail to the Oregon Country was a five-month trip from their old home in the East to their new home in the West. It was different for every family. Some people got ready to leave the East, or "jump off" as they called it, in towns like St. Joseph or Council Bluffs, and others jumped off from their old homes in Illinois or Missouri and picked up the Oregon Trail in the countryside. Along the way, they could choose to take shortcuts or stick to the main trunk of the Trail, and the end of their journey didn't really come until they settled a claim somewhere in the vast Oregon Country.

What's this "Oregon Country" you keep mentioning?

The State of Oregon was established in 1859 with its present boundaries. In 1848, the Oregon Territory was declared, making the region -- the states of Oregon, Washington, and Idaho, along with part of western Montana -- part of the United States. Before 1848, it was called the Oregon Country because it was not claimed by the USA. The Oregon Country was even bigger than the Oregon Territory, since it stretched north all the way to Alaska. It was also claimed by the British Empire, but so many American settlers arrived in the 1840s that the British only held on to control over the northern part of the Oregon Country. That part of the old Oregon Country is now western Canada.

Why did people want to go there?

Lots of reasons. There were some families that just had the habit of moving west every five or ten years to follow the frontier. They liked the extra freedom of life on the frontier, but civilization kept catching up to them. It seemed to them like emigrating to Oregon would be the last move they would ever have to make. Others were in search of opportunity -- there were hard times back East, but in the 1840s married settlers could claim a square mile of the Oregon Country, 640 acres, at no cost. Oregon had a reputation not only for having good farmland and vast forests of huge, ancient

trees, but also for being free of disease. This made the Oregon Country even more attractive, since epidemics were common in the East and little was known about the causes of disease and infection. The idea of allowing such valuable land to fall into the hands of the British inspired patriotic Americans to head for Oregon, and gold strikes in southern and eastern Oregon during the 1850s inspired other sorts of Americans.

Didn't that make the Indians angry?

Some of them, yes -- very angry. The Pacific Northwest had its share of theft, violence, and massacres as Europeans and Americans arrived and took control of the land from the Indians. However, most of the Indians in the Oregon Country welcomed the white settlers. Their experience with British and American traders led them to see the settlers as a new source of wealth, as tribes which traded with whites became rich and powerful compared with their neighbors. When American settlers began arriving, Indians often guided them through the mountains or let them stake a claim on tribal lands in exchange for gunpowder, food, clothes, or horses. Unfortunately, the traders and settlers also brought new diseases to the Indians, diseases like smallpox and measles which killed whole tribes. A single sick sailor on a trading ship killed almost the entire 800-member Multnomah tribe, and by the mid-1840s the Willamette Valley had been largely cleared of Indians not by fighting, but by plagues.

Yikes! Why didn't the Indians try to kick the settlers out?

A lot of the credit for keeping the peace goes to Dr. John McLoughlin of the Hudson's Bay Company, whose word was law for twenty years until Americans began arriving in great numbers. McLoughlin was a wise man and often generous to those in need, even penniless American settlers. Lewis and Clark -- not to mention Sacajawea -- also deserve credit for their skill and good luck in dealing with the Indians. The good relations begun in 1805 between whites and the Nez Perce tribe when the Lewis and Clark expedition passed through their lands lasted for 70 years. The Nez Perce did well during a time when their neighbors were decimated by disease, alcoholism, and skirmishes with the settlers, and by the 1870s they were the last major tribe left intact in the region. Sadly, that ended when the government decided that the Nez Perce would be better off on a reservation after gold was discovered on their land.

So Lewis and Clark paved the way for the settlers?

Hmm... yes and no. Remember that Lewis and Clark made their trip about 35 years before the Oregon Trail came into use, and they took a completely different route through the Rocky Mountains -- South Pass, where the Oregon Trail crossed the Continental Divide, was named "South Pass" because it's south of the pass used by Lewis and Clark. Really, Lewis and Clark paved the way for the fur trappers who explored the West, the trappers paved the way for missionaries who tried to convert the Indians to Christianity, and the missionaries paved the way for the settlers who broke the British claim to the Pacific Northwest.

What were the British doing there, anyway?

Mostly, they were trapping beavers. Fur was worth big money to the British because of a fad among the wealthy for beaver top hats, and through the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company, the British fielded a small army of French Canadian and half-Indian trappers. There were so many skilled trappers that they could quickly "trap out" entire valleys, forcing them to push farther and farther afield to find the furs they needed to make a living. After conflicts over territory turned violent in the 1810s, the British government restored the peace in 1821 by allowing the Hudson's Bay Company to take over the North West Company. The NWC had arrived in the Oregon Country as far back as 1807, so the Hudson's Bay Company inherited its forts there in 1821. By the 1840s, when the Oregon Trail came into use, the beaver were mostly trapped out and the HBC was shifting its goals to settling the prairies in the Willamette Valley and around Puget Sound. Most of the British settlers were former trappers who had married Indian women and decided to settle down in Oregon, and they were soon outnumbered by Americans. For a short time, the British Empire thought about going to war against the United States over the question of who ruled the Oregon Country. They even sent spies into Oregon to scout the land for the army and find out if the settlers would raise a militia. The spies reported that the terrain would make for hard marching and the American settlers were not only patriotic enough to resist a British invasion, but they had enough guns to put up a real fight, as well. That was the end of any talk about another war.

So the British were trappers and the Americans were farmers?

Yeah, that's about the size of it. The British saw the Oregon Country as just another territory in their empire, a land to be exploited for whatever resources were worth the most money. In India, it was tea; in Oregon, it happened to be fur. The Americans, on the other hand, were in it for the long haul: Oregon wasn't a colony to them, it was going to become part of the United States (there were some people who wanted to make Oregon an independent country, but most of the settlers considered themselves Americans and were proud of it -- even some of the Brits who had to apply for citizenship after Oregon was declared a federal Territory in 1848 became flag-waving, fireworks-shooting Americans). Of course, California beat them to it, but only because of the Gold Rush.

Now that you mention it, isn't there a California Trail, too?

There are lots of trails out here in the West. Offhand, there's the Lewis and Clark Trail, the Oregon Trail, the California Trail, the Mormon Trail, the Santa Fe Trail, the Bozeman Trail, the Southern Route (or Applegate Trail), the Free Emigrant Road, the Cherokee Trail, the Pony Express Trail(s), the Nez Perce Trail, and too many shortcuts and military roads to even try to list here. Still, the California Trail is one of the big ones: it followed the Oregon Trail across the Great Plains and over the Continental Divide, and then cut off from the Oregon Trail near Fort Hall to follow two or three major routes to the gold fields. Tens of thousands of prospectors, miners, and carpetbaggers followed the California Trail west after gold was found at Sutter's Mill in 1848. However, this Web site belongs to Clackamas Heritage Partners.

It followed the Oregon Trail...so the Oregon Trail came first?

Actually, as an emigrant road, the Oregon Trail is exactly as old as the California Trail. A party of about a hundred families was headed for California in 1841, but they split at Fort Hall when half of them decided to settle in Oregon, instead. Before gold was discovered in California, most settlers were Oregon bound, so the entire length of the trail is generally called the Oregon Trail, not just the leg that led to Oregon. On the other hand, the route across the plains, which followed the Platte River for most of its length, was used by thousands of Mormons headed for Utah as well as overlanders headed for Oregon and California, so it's sometimes called "the Great Platte River Road" to avoid any confusion about who was following it.

How long did it take to get to Oregon?

At least four months. Emigrants who finished the trip in five months were thought to have made good time. Stragglers who needed six or seven months to reach Oregon risked running into winter weather in the mountains -- and after the 1846 ordeal of the Donner-Reed Party, the thought of being that slow was enough to frighten anyone into action.

What was the trip like?

Exhausting, boring, dangerous, frightening, and exciting -- probably in about that order. It was exhausting because the emigrants had to walk almost the entire way, though a few of them rode horses. They didn't ride in their wagons because they wanted to spare the oxen pulling the wagons, but sometimes the women and children would pile into the wagons when the weather was foul. Even without the extra weight of people in the wagons, the trip was so long that even the sturdiest ox could die from exhaustion or go mad from thirst. Boredom came from the daily routine of breaking camp, walking, making camp again in the evening, and eating the same thing day after day, all in the midst of a cloud of dust and grit thrown up by the wagons and animals. Every once in a while, the boredom was broken by a dangerous river crossing or a steep hill. Historians estimate that one in every ten people on the Oregon Trail died on the way to Oregon. Most of them were killed accidentally: guns went off because someone wasn't paying attention to what they were doing, children fell and were crushed by wagon wheels, people were hurt trying to round up frightened or injured livestock, and so on. At least one person is known to have been struck by lightning. Disease was the single biggest killer on the Trail, especially during a cholera epidemic around 1850. The nightmare most feared by the overlanders -- being attacked by Indians -- was usually the last thing they had to worry about. Still, it wasn't all bad: there were marriages, births, and holidays (especially the Fourth of July) to celebrate along the way, and it was always a big day when a major landmark like Chimney Rock came into view for the first time.

How many people came west on the Oregon Trail?

At least 80,000 emigrants followed the Oregon Trail to settle in the present-day states of Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. That estimate has been creeping upwards over the years, and as many as 200,000 people may have traveled the Trail by wagon.

When was the Oregon Trail in use?

The Trail was in regular use from 1843 until the 1870s. When the Union Pacific completed the first railroad link to the West Coast in 1869, the preferred route became by train to San Francisco, then north to Oregon by ship, but wagon trains could still be seen on the Oregon Trail as late as the 1880s. The last wagon widely known to have traveled the length of the Trail was driven in 1906 by Ezra Meeker, an aging Oregon Trail emigrant who was conducting a one-man publicity campaign to remind people of the historic significance of the Oregon Trail. However, we've had visitors at the End of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center who recalled that because their family couldn't afford the train fare, they traveled the Trail by wagon as late as 1912.

DID THE OREGON TRAIL START HERE?

Where did the Oregon Trail really start? The answer is difficult because there was no single Oregon Trail. There were cutoffs, alternate routes, and a number of wagon roads through the countryside which fed into the main trunk of the Trail -- the Nebraska City Road, for instance, picked up the Platte River over 100 miles east of Fort Kearny, where the Oregon Trail proper reached the Platte. For over forty years, emigrants left the eastern half of North America with every intention of settling in the western half, even if they had no idea exactly where it was or how to get there.

Pioneers -- and for at least the first few years, the emigrants were truly so -- came from farms and villages across the Old Northwest and Southwest Territories. They sold their land, packed their trunks, and booked passage on a steamer bound for Missouri River towns such as Independence, St. Joseph, or Council Bluffs.

These jumping-off spots, as they were called, were places to supply the bands of travelers with the items necessary to get the party to its destination: a wagon, draft animals, clothing, food, and camping supplies. Early farmers and miners found it necessary to carry with them the tools of their craft -- plows, harnesses, picks, pans, and shovels -- but as towns and cities sprang up in the West, it was no longer necessary to take with them what they could buy in Oregon City or Sacramento.

As the trails became more heavily traveled, another handy and necessary item became available in the Midwest: guidebooks for emigrants could be purchased for a nominal fee, around 10 cents. At first, they were not all that reliable. Authors working from memory or interviews with recent travelers sometimes mixed up beacons or guideposts along the way.

In later years, as the Civil War neared and Indian uprisings became common, men would hire themselves out as guides or scouts. They were typically about as reliable as the guidebooks.

The initial jumping-off spot for emigrants to Oregon was Independence, Missouri. Its location on both the Missouri River and the Santa Fe Trail destined it for this status. When Oregon became a destination for Americans fleeing the economic hardships of the East in favor of free land and

opportunity in the West, the facilities for outfitting for the trek were already in place at Independence.

Emigrants would camp for up to three weeks along the river banks where the steamers disgorged them as they purchased animals, had a wagon made, trained their teams, and bought their supplies. Then they met at Independence Court House Square, where they hit the trail for Oregon.

The initial route of the westward overland trail was to follow the Santa Fe Trail into Kansas until it reached a small, inconspicuous sign, probably the most understated road sign in American history. Marking the beginning of an arduous four-to-six month, 2000 mile trek across plains, desert, rivers, and mountains, the sign simply read, "Road to Oregon." One in ten pioneers would be left in graves along the way. Families would be broken, and treasured possessions lost or left behind at river crossings and difficult mountain grades.

Overcrowding at the Wayne City landing for Independence, followed soon by a cholera epidemic, left emigrants looking for other jumping-off spots. Westport, Oregon Crossing, Fort Leavenworth, and Weston were further up the river in Missouri, which meant that jumping off from those towns would save a few days' travel. The farther west the emigrants jumped off, the shorter their trip would be. By the late 1850s, lower steamboat fares opened jumping-off spots in Iowa and Nebraska, such as Plattsmouth, Nebraska City, Council Bluffs, and Omaha.

When the Mormons were chased out of Illinois and headed west under the leadership of Brigham Young, their Winter Quarters were on the west bank of the Missouri River (pronounced "Misery River" by some) just north of present-day Omaha. The Saints set out for Utah the next spring following the north shore of the Platte River. For several hundred miles the Oregon Trail and Mormon Trail paralleled each other on opposite banks of the Platte River, until the two Trails joined for a time near Fort Laramie.

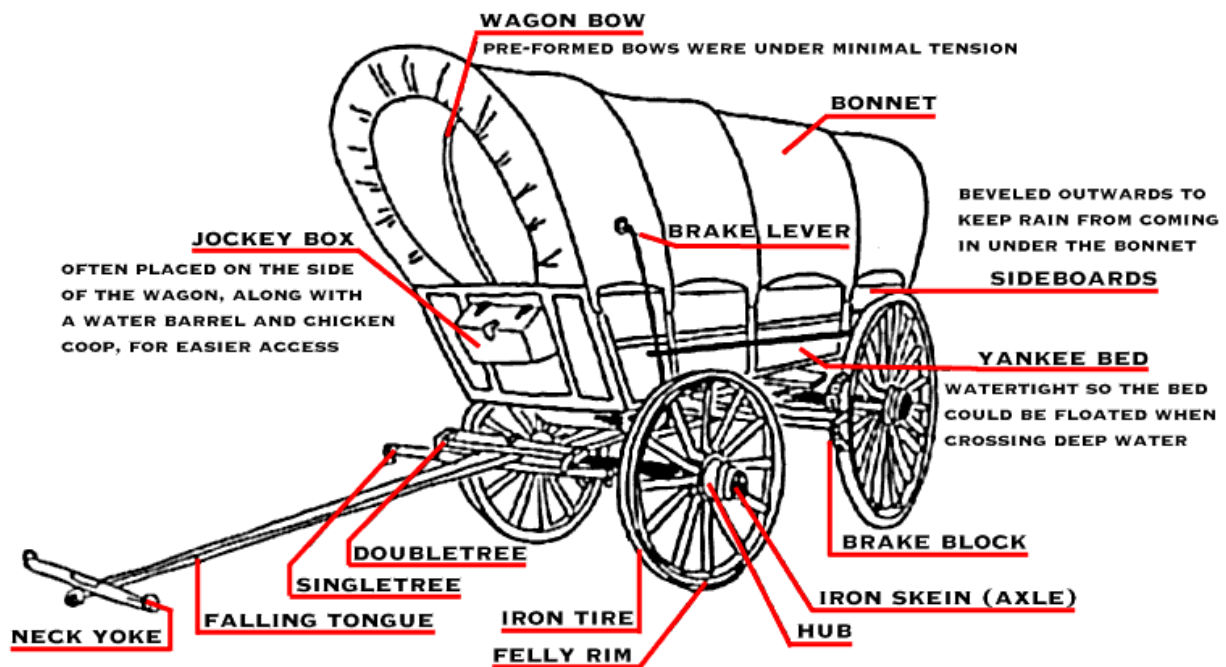
The chief competitor to Independence in the early years was St. Joseph, Missouri, better known today as the birthplace of the Pony Express. Founded in 1825 as "Blacksnake Hills" by fur trapper and trader Joseph Robidoux, the town was platted and renamed in 1843. By then, St. Joe had three stores and a hotel -- nothing to sneeze at on the frontier! In 1850, with cholera in Independence and gold recently discovered in California, the population of St. Joe exploded to 3000 permanent residents and as many as 10,000 emigrants living in "Gambling Hells" -- ramshackle temporary communities described as little more than men, mules, and tents -- while they waited for spring to arrive and open the overland trails for the year.

Following the discovery of gold in the West, the emigrant trails took on a different character. Covered farm wagons carrying entire families and their worldly possessions were replaced by handcarts, two-wheelers, or pack animals without wagons carrying bachelors and wayward husbands who often had no intention of permanently settling in the West. All previous jumping-off spots were used by these fortune hunters.

Shops in Missouri, Iowa, and Nebraska kept up with the changing times and brought in new stock to cater to their shifting clientele. Entirely novel products began showing up, especially those made out of a new and wondrous material: rubber. Emigrants quickly took to wearing India rubber boots, raincoats, and life preservers, and some even complained in their diaries that their air mattresses had leaked during the night.

Wherever they jumped off from, they were headed west. And their journeys had just begun.

WAGONS



WAGON DESIGN COURTESY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

PRAIRIE SCHOONERS

The most common wagons used for hauling freight back East were the Conestogas, developed in Pennsylvania by descendants of German colonists. Conestoga wagons were large, heavy, and had beds shaped somewhat like boats, with angled ends and a floor that sloped to the middle so barrels wouldn't roll out when the wagon was climbing or descending a hill. Like the covered wagons of the western pioneers, it had a watertight canvas bonnet to shelter the cargo. Conestogas were pulled by teams of six or eight horses and could haul up to five tons.

Traders on the Santa Fe Trail adopted the Conestoga design for its durability and size, but they found that bullwhackers or muleskinners were preferable to teamsters -- the immense distances and scarcity of good water along the Santa Fe Trail precluded the use of horses as draft animals. Teams of up to two dozen oxen or mules were used to haul the heaviest loads. Sometimes a second wagon, or "backaction," was hitched behind the lead wagon.



Overlanders on the Oregon Trail, in contrast, quickly learned that Conestoga wagons were too big for their needs: the huge, heavy wagons killed even the sturdiest oxen before the journey was two-thirds complete. Their answer to the problem was dubbed the "Prairie

Schooner," a half-sized version of the Conestoga that typically measured 4' wide and 10' to 12' in length. With its tongue and neck yoke attached, its length doubled to about 23 feet. With the bonnet, a Prairie Schooner stood about 10' tall, and its wheelbase was over 5' wide. It weighed around 1300 pounds empty and could be easily dismantled for repairs en route. Teams of 4 to 6 oxen or 6 to 10 mules were sufficient to get the sturdy little wagons to Oregon. Manufactured by the Studebaker brothers or any of a dozen other wainwrights specializing in building wagons for the overland emigrants, a Prairie Schooner in good repair offered shelter almost as good as a house.

The wagon box, or bed, was made of hardwoods to resist shrinking in the dry air of the plains and deserts the emigrants had to cross. It was 2' to 3' deep, and with a bit of tar it could easily be rendered watertight and floated across slow-moving rivers. The side boards were beveled outwards to keep rain from coming in under the edges of the bonnet and to help keep out river water. The box sat upon two sets of wheels of different sizes: the rear wheels were typically about 50" in diameter, while the front wheels were about 44" in diameter. The smaller front wheels allowed for a little extra play, letting the wagon take slightly sharper turns than it would otherwise have been able to negotiate without necessitating a great deal of extra carpentry work to keep the bed level. All four wheels had iron "tires" to protect the wooden rims, and they were likewise constructed of hardwoods to resist shrinkage. Nonetheless, many emigrants took to soaking their wagon wheels in rivers and springs overnight, as it was not unheard of for the dry air to shrink the wood so much that the iron tires would roll right off the wheels during the day.

Hardwood bows held up the heavy, brown bonnets. The bows were soaked until the wood became pliable, bent into U-shapes, and allowed to dry. They would hold their shape if this was done properly, which was important to the emigrants: if the wagon bows were under too much tension, they could spring loose and tear the bonnet while the wagon was jostled and jounced over rough terrain. The bonnets themselves were usually homespun cotton doubled over to make them watertight. They were rarely painted (except for the occasional slogan such as "Pike's Peak or Bust" in later years) as this stiffened the fabric and caused it to split. The bonnet was always well-secured against the wind, and its edges overlapped in back to keep out rain and dust. On some wagons, it

also angled outward at the front and back, as shown in the illustration above, to lend some additional protection to the wagon's interior.

While wagons were minor marvels of Nineteenth Century engineering, they inevitably broke down or wore out from the difficulty and length of the journey. Equipment for making repairs en route was carried in a jockey box attached to one end or side of the wagon. It carried extra iron bolts, linch pins, skeins, nails, hoop iron, a variety of tools, and a jack. Also commonly found slung on the sides of emigrant wagons were water barrels, a butter churn, a shovel and axe, a tar bucket, a feed trough for the livestock, and a chicken coop. A fully outfitted wagon on the Oregon Trail must have been quite a sight, particularly with a coop full of clucking chickens raising a ruckus every time the wagon hit a rock.

There was only one set of springs on a Prairie Schooner, and they were underneath the rarely-used driver's seat. Without sprung axles, riding inside a wagon was uncomfortable at the best of times. Some stretches of the Trail were so rough that an overlander could fill his butter churn with fresh milk in the morning, and the wagon would bounce around enough to churn a small lump of butter for the evening meal. The simple leaf springs under the driver's seat made that perch tenable, but not particularly comfortable. The illustration above does not show the driver's seat, and its placement of the brake lever is questionable. The brake lever was usually located so it could be pressed by the driver's foot or thrown by someone walking alongside the wagon, and it was ratcheted so the brake block would remain set against the wheel even after pressure was taken off the lever.

While Prairie Schooners were specifically built for overland travel, many emigrants instead braved the Oregon Trail in simple farm wagons retrofitted with bonnets. Farm wagons were typically slightly smaller than Prairie Schooners and not as well sheltered, as their bonnets usually were not cantilevered out at the front and back, but they were quite similar in most other respects.

OUTFITTING FOR THE TRAIL

It is believed that over 200 steam-powered riverboats sank in the Missouri River during the mid-Nineteenth Century. Two of them were excavated in 1988. One, the *Bertrand*, was brought to light 120 years after sinking in what is now part of the DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge near Omaha. The other, the *Arabia*, was dug out of a soybean field near Independence more than 130 years after it went down.

The *Arabia* was supplying the covered wagon trade of Independence and Westport. Its cargo, right down to an unfortunate horse tethered to the deck, was brought up intact, preserved by the suffocating mud of the Missouri. The *Bertrand* was heading to Council Bluffs with a load of supplies and tools to outfit gold miners following the latest rush to Montana. Salvage crews back in 1868 removed a small treasure of gold bound for the banks in Council Bluffs, but they left its cargo of

picks, shovels, bottles, clothing, medicines, and similarly mundane supplies for Twentieth Century treasure hunters.

Outfitting the western travelers was big business for merchants along the banks of the Missouri River from St. Louis to Omaha. The Oregon-bound emigrants were generally poor families who had sold everything they owned (or at least what the bank had not yet repossessed) and booked passage out of town on the same steamboats that were bringing in supplies for their local general stores. While outfitting for the journey, early pioneers were told they needed to purchase everything necessary to sustain them along the Trail for up to six months, as well as farming and building supplies for when they arrived in Oregon -- in other words, everything they would need for the rest of their lives.

Later Oregon emigrants had easier decisions to make. As time went on, the Trail and its environs were thoroughly documented and explored, and the route was improved by the passage of thousands of wagons beating the land flat, entrepreneurs operating ferries at the major river crossings, and the discovery of alternate routes that shaved days off the trip. As the road was more developed and the trip took less time, emigrants could carry heavier loads in their wagons. The need to bring seeds and tools for use on arrival in Oregon vanished, as stores in Oregon City were now supplied with goods brought around Cape Horn by ship. However, they still needed food, gear, medical supplies, and clothing for at least four months on the road.

The first item needed was, of course, a wagon and team. Some brought their old farm wagons from home, while others purchased one at their chosen jumping off point. Dozens of blacksmiths made good money fixing up and manufacturing wagons for the overlanders. The big, sloped Conestoga wagons of the freight trade were too big for the Rocky Mountains, so a smaller wagon with a 10 to 12 foot flat bed capable of carrying up to 2500 pounds was developed from the basic farm model. A canvas bonnet stretched over 5 to 7 curved bows protected what was to be stored inside, and the sideboards were beveled outward to keep rain from coming in under the edges of the bonnet.

The choice of draft animals for the journey was an important decision. Horses were not satisfactory for pulling wagons across the plains, as the forage was not good, insects drove them to distraction, and tepid waters left most draft horses ill. A team of 8 or 10 tough mules would definitely be faster, but they were hard to control, given to mayhem in storms, and reduced to walking skeletons by the hard pull. The first choice of most emigrants was a team of 4 or 6 oxen, paired in yokes. The beasts were sure, patient, steady, and obedient. They showed adaptability to prairie grasses and were less expensive than horses. The emigrants correctly concluded that while oxen would not get them to Oregon in record time, they would, indeed, get them to Oregon.

Whichever animal was chosen, shoes were required, as the journey was long enough to wear away the animals' hooves. Teams heading to California, even oxen, required snowshoes as well. It was desirable to buy animals already broken in on prairie grasses, accustomed to yokes, and trained to follow instructions. However, such animals were difficult to find and more expensive to purchase when they were available. Thus, most emigrants planned to spend 2 or 3 weeks in Missouri training their teams and packing their wagons before actually setting out for Oregon.

The success or failure of a party depended most heavily on their choice of equipment and supplies for the journey. Every emigrant insisted on taking along some luxuries and items of sentimental value. Chamber pots, lanterns, mirrors, Bibles, school books, clocks, and furniture were crammed into odd spaces in almost every wagon. Emigrants were advised not to overload their wagons, but many underestimated the magnitude of the trek they were setting out on and were later forced to discard nonessential cargo. Hard stretches of the Trail became littered with such castoffs as emigrants lightened the load for their weary animals.

Certain accessories and tools for making emergency repairs to a wagon were necessary to bring along. These included rope, brake chains, a wagon jack, extra axles and tongues, wheel parts, axes, saws, hammers, knives, and a sturdy shovel. Cooking utensils were also required -- few overlanders were without a Dutch oven and a good iron skillet -- and the trip was simply not possible without a water barrel to get the party and their animals through dry stretches of the Trail. Weapons and kits for casting bullets were essential, as well, though they were far more commonly used for hunting than for fighting Indians.

However, most of the space in the emigrants' wagons was reserved for food. The endless walking and hard work made even the most delicate appetites ravenous. Hundreds of pounds of dried goods and cured meats were packed into the wagons, including flour, hardtack, bacon, rice, coffee, sugar, beans, and fruit. Coffee, though the emigrants had no way of knowing it, probably saved thousands of lives on the overland trails, as it required that the water be boiled, thus killing any germs (including cholera) that might sicken the emigrants. In addition to their supplies, many emigrants had the family milk cow tied behind the wagon to provide fresh milk at meal time, and some fixed a chicken coop to the side of the wagon, as well. The fresh milk and eggs -- and later, meat -- were an important source of protein and calories for the overlanders, and they made for a welcome relief from the dried and preserved food that dominated many of their meals.

It was possible to obtain fresh food along the Trail, but often not desirable. Hunting took precious time, though not many overlanders could resist the temptation of taking off after a buffalo herd when one was encountered. Trading posts sold food and other goods, but at high prices that few overlanders could afford.

PROVISIONS FOR THE TRAIL

Crossing the continent to settle in Oregon was not a journey for the faint of heart, and neither was it a journey for the poor. It required a minimum of about \$500 to outfit for the trip, and this could easily become \$1000 or more if an emigrant needed to purchase a wagon and draft animals. The food and other provisions needed to sustain a family on the Oregon Trail for six months took up most of the room in their wagon -- though the overlanders' wagons were structurally capable of carrying as much as two tons when in good repair, the conventional wisdom at the time was not to carry more than 1600-1800 pounds of cargo. A typical emigrant wagon started out from Missouri loaded down with flour, sugar, bacon, coffee beans, lard, spices, dried fruit, beans, rice, and perhaps

even a keg of pickles (a popular and tasty choice for warding off the dangers of malnutrition). Add to that the weight of cast iron pots and pans, a kettle or two, a Dutch oven, and even more food for large families, and you can see why some wealthier families brought two wagons... one for the food and one for everything else!

You want light wagons of the very best materials and workmanship, extra irons. The beds should be water tight. ... cover of good drilling, doubled. Tent of the same (single) of the Military or wall style. Tent poles ironed. Tools: Ax, Hatchet, 1/2, 3/4, 1, and 1 1/2 inch augurs, Inch chisel, Drawing knife, handsaw, and a few wrought nails. ... you will want a spade and a long one inch rope, say one hundred feet. ...

- William N. Byers

Prices in the mid-1800s fluctuated from month to month and from town to town. The cost of manufactured or imported goods rose in step with the distance to the nearest steamboat landing, as hauling cargo over land by wagon was very expensive compared to shipping it by boat. Conversely, prices for farm produce were usually lower in the countryside than in towns and cities because it was costly for farmers to get their crops to market.

The prices listed below were gathered from a number of sources, including diaries, bills of lading, estate appraisals, and accounts from general stores back East. This price list is a broad generalization of the cost of outfitting for the Oregon Trail in the 1840s and early '50s; it should not be interpreted as representing the cost of food and goods in any particular town at any particular time. If you would like to estimate the cost of items not listed here, you can make a rough adjustment for 150 years of inflation by dividing the price by 20.

DRAFT ANIMALS

ox \$30-35 minimum of 4-6, but it would be wise to have more

milk cow \$70-75

cattle \$8-20 priced by age (typically 1-3 years old)

mule \$10-15

pack horse \$25

riding horse up to \$75

bridle & blinders \$3

tack & harness \$5

mule collar \$1.25

horse blanket \$2

whip \$1

pack saddle \$2.50

saddle & saddle bags \$5

WAGONS

covered wagon \$70 there's no evidence that wagons made for the emigrant trade held up any better than ordinary farm wagons

farm wagon \$25-30

wagon bows \$3/set for converting a farm wagon to a covered wagon

cloth cover up to \$1/yard some emigrants bought heavy canvas sailcloth, while others wove their own linen wagon covers and waterproofed them with beeswax or linseed oil

grease potentially free - before petroleum could be distilled, animal fats were used as lubricants; the tallow was usually mixed with pine resin, or sometimes beeswax thinned with turpentine

bucket \$1

SUNDRIES & CAMP EQUIPMENT

woolen blanket \$2.50

tent \$5 – 15 prices varied with size

nails \$0.07 per pound

soap \$0.15 per pound

sheet iron stove \$15 - 20

coffee mill \$1.00

coffee pot \$0.75

frying pan \$1.50

stew kettle \$0.50

bread pan \$0.25

butcher knife \$0.50

tin table settings \$5 - includes flatware, plates, and cups for a family of eight

candles \$0.15 per pound

10-gallon wash tub \$1.25

Bucket \$0.25 - "tar buckets" for storing axle grease had tight-fitting tops to keep flies out and cost \$1

axe/shovel/hoe \$1.25

hand tools \$2.50 - such as augurs, planes, and saws

rope \$2.50 - 50' - 75' coil of 3/4" hemp rope

WEAPONS

rifle \$15 - double barreled rifles were sometimes seen on the frontier, as repeating rifles were not widely available until after the Civil War

shotgun or musket \$10 - there were also double barreled shotguns, as well as hybrids fitted with one rifled barrel and one smooth-bored shotgun barrel

Colt revolver \$25

single-shot pistol \$5

powder & shot \$5 - shot was generally sold by the pound

hunting knife \$1

FOOD

flour \$0.02 per pound - Recommended for each adult: 150 lbs. of flour, 20 lbs. of corn meal, 50 lbs. of bacon, 40 lbs. of sugar, 10 lbs. of coffee, 15 lbs. of dried fruit, 5 lbs. of salt, half a pound of saleratus (baking soda), 2 lbs. of tea, 5 lbs. of rice, and 15 lbs. of beans

To the above may be added as many nicknacks as you see fit, always remembering that such things do not lose their good taste by being brought on the plains.

- William N. Byers

corn meal \$0.05 per pound

bacon \$0.05 per pound

sugar \$0.04 per pound

coffee \$0.10 per pound

dried fruit \$0.06 per pound

salt \$0.06 per pound

pepper \$0.08 per pound

lard \$0.05 per pound

vinegar \$0.25 per gallon

saleratus \$0.12 per pound

tea \$0.60 per pound

rice \$0.05 per pound

beans \$0.06 per pound

ON THE TRAIL

Some examples of expenses the emigrant encountered while en route...

Indian moccasins \$0.50 - many emigrants wore out several pairs of shoes on the road to Oregon

tanned buffalo hide \$4.00

crossing bridges from \$0.15 to \$0.50 per wagon - prices for bridges and ferries were generally negotiable, and additional charges per head of livestock were common

ferrying rivers \$2 - \$5 per wagon

resupplying - once beyond the frontier, prices at trading posts along the Oregon Trail were typically at least twice those back East and could be much higher

PRICES IN OREGON (1852)

oxen and cows \$50 – 100 - the first herds of cattle in Oregon were Mexican longhorns driven up from California, but the American settlers considered them to be an inferior breed and were willing to pay top dollar for cattle of known breeds which survived the journey to Oregon, while the longhorns went for as little as \$9 a head

wagon \$100 - 200

bacon \$0.25 per pound

pork \$0.125 per pound

beef \$0.10 per pound

tallow \$0.15 per pound

lard \$0.25 per pound

butter \$0.60 per pound

flour \$0.06 per pound

coffee \$0.20 per pound

sugar \$0.10 - 0.16/lb

rice \$0.06 per pound

dried peaches \$0.12 per pound

apples \$0.12 per pound

saleratus \$0.25 per pound

salt \$0.03 per pound

wheat \$1.03 per bushel

oats \$1.25 per bushel

onions \$2.50 per bushel

potatos \$0.75 per bushel

beans and peas \$1.50 per bushel

chickens \$1 - prices for chickens and turkeys are for whole, living birds

turkeys \$2 - 2.50

nails \$0.17 per pound

tobacco \$0.25 per pound

candles \$0.75 per pound

plow iron \$62.50

lumber \$25 per thousand board feet - lumber prices varied somewhat according to how it was cut and what sort of tree it used to be

Prices in Oregon were typically subject to even more fluctuation than those back East, as the local economy was very much in flux. Labor costs were a major headache for entrepreneurs in Oregon, as gold strikes throughout the 1850s drove wages sky-high. Prices for farm produce were low during the summer and fall and rose during the winter and spring; prices for imported goods dropped when several ships carrying such cargo arrived within a few weeks of one another, but would then rise again as the supply dwindled. Traditional boom-and-bust cycles (in which a commodity in limited supply commands high prices, thereby inspiring people to make so much of it that the price collapses) were also a serious problem in Oregon's early economy. Additionally, there was a constant shortage of capital in the economy even after the gold strikes, as most of the gold soon found its way out of Oregon to pay for imports. Barter remained a fairly common means of transacting business until after the Civil War, though cash on the barrelhead was preferred.

The gold mines have ever been a curse and a drawback to this country. Prices of labor do not correspond with the prices of our produce... How can farmers afford to pay \$40 per month for second rate hands, fifty dollars for common two horse harness, two hundred dollars for a common two horse wagon, twenty-five dollars for a two horse plow, twelve cents a bushel for threshing grain -- and sell their wheat at 75 cents, oats 40 cents, potatoes 25 cents, pork 5 to 6 cents, onions \$1, peas 75 cents, etc. etc. I pay sawyers on my mill \$60 per month, log choppers \$40 to \$50 per month, teamsters the same, and yet I sell good flooring, fencing, ceiling, and weatherboards at \$12 per thousand feet! Hence many, very many, will vote for Slavery in order to cheapen labor!

- David Newsom, 1857

LIFE AND DEATH ON THE OREGON TRAIL

In December of 1847, Loren Hastings was walking the stump-filled, muddy streets of Portland, Oregon, when he chanced upon a friend he had known back in Illinois. Hastings had made the trip on the Oregon Trail unscathed, while his friend had lost his wife. Hastings' summary of their feelings was eloquent: "I look back upon the long, dangerous and precarious emigrant road with a degree of romance and pleasure; but to others it is the graveyard of their friends."

The overlanders encountered their first hardship before they even left home, as leaving friends and family behind was difficult. Henry Garrison described his uncle's parting from Iowa: "When Grandmother learned the next morning that they were then on their way, she kneeled down and prayed that God would guard and protect them on their perilous journey." She would never see them again.

Covered wagons dominated traffic on the Oregon Trail. The Independence-style wagon was typically about 11 feet long, 4 feet wide, and 2 feet deep, with bows of hardwood supporting a bonnet that rose about 5 feet above the wagon bed. With only one set of springs under the driver's seat and none on the axles, nearly everyone walked along with their herds of cattle and sheep.

Emigrants banded together into parties or companies for mutual assistance and protection. Parties usually consisted of relatives or persons from the same hometown traveling together. In some cases they formed joint stock companies, such as the Boston and Newton Joint Stock Association, Iron City Telegraph Company, Wild Rovers, and the Peoria Pioneers.

Organization was required to ensure a successful journey. The most successful groups had a written constitution, code, resolutions, or by-laws to which the emigrants could refer when disagreements threatened to get out of hand. Almost all wagon trains had regulations of some sort, and rare was the group that didn't elect or otherwise appoint officers. The regulations typically included rules for camping and marching and restrictions on gambling and drinking. There were penalties for infractions, social security for the sick or bereaved, and provisions established for the disposition of shares of deceased members of a party.

A typical day started before dawn with breakfast of coffee, bacon, and dry bread. The bedding was secured and wagon repacked in time to get underway by seven o'clock. At noon, they stopped for a cold meal of coffee, beans, and bacon or buffalo prepared that morning. Then back on the road again. Around five in the afternoon, after traveling an average of fifteen miles, they circled the wagons for the evening. The men secured the animals and made repairs while women cooked a hot meal of tea and boiled rice with dried beef or codfish. Evening activities included schooling the children, singing and dancing, and telling stories around the campfire. Some trains insisted on stopping every Sunday, while others reserved only Sunday morning for religious activities and pushed on during the afternoon. Resting on Sundays, in addition to giving the oxen and other animals a needed break, also gave the women of the wagon train a chance to tend to their domestic chores -- particularly doing the laundry, as the dust on the Trail pervaded every article of clothing exposed to it. Occasionally, a wagon train's arrival at a source of clean water was enough to prompt a special stopover for laundry day.

Marriages and births were always special occasions, and there were a surprising number of both on the Oregon Trail. Weddings were common either at the jumping off spots or, for those romances that bloomed along the Trail, on the Platte River or at Fort Laramie. A tongue-in-cheek conspiracy against the privacy of newlyweds by older-weds was called a "shivaree." Virtually every train had expectant mothers, and their newborns were often named for natural features, events, or important days. There is one story of an orphaned baby who was passed from breast to breast to be fed.

Leaving behind keepsakes, heirlooms, or wedding gifts was a painful reality many emigrants had to eventually face. Articles too precious to leave behind in the East were later abandoned along the trail to spare weary oxen. Hard stretches of the trail were littered with piles of "leeverites" -- items the emigrants had to "leave 'er right here" to lighten their wagons. In later years, the Mormons made a cottage industry of salvaging the leeverites and selling them back to emigrants passing through the Salt Lake Valley. This practice, while arguably displaying an enviable entrepreneurial spirit, engendered further ill will between Mormons and Gentiles.

The tiring pace of the journey -- fifteen miles a day, almost always on foot -- got to many an emigrant. Elizabeth Markham went insane along the Snake River, announcing to her family that she was not proceeding any farther. Her husband was forced to take the wagons and children and leave her behind, though he later sent their son back to retrieve her. When she returned on her own, her husband was informed that she had clubbed their son to death with a rock. He raced back to retrieve the boy, who was still clinging to life, and on his return found that his wife had taken advantage of his absence to set fire to one of the family's wagons.

Perils along the way caused many would-be emigrants to turn back. Weather related dangers included thunderstorms, lethally large hailstones, lightning, tornadoes, and high winds. The intense heat of the deserts caused wood to shrink, and wagon wheels had to be soaked in rivers at night to keep their iron rims from rolling right off during the day. The dust on the Trail itself could be two or three inches deep and as fine as flour. Ox shoes fell off and hooves split, to be cured with hot tar. The emigrants' lips blistered and split in the dry air, and their only remedy was to rub axle grease on their lips. River crossings were often dangerous: even if the current was slow and the water shallow, wagon wheels could be damaged by unseen rocks or become mired in the muddy bottom. If dust or mud didn't slow the wagons, stampedes of domestic herd animals or wild buffalo often would.

Nearly one in ten who set off on the Oregon Trail did not survive. The two biggest causes of death were disease and accidents. The disease with the worst reputation was Asiatic cholera, known as the "unseen destroyer." Cholera crept silently, caused by unsanitary conditions: people camped amid garbage left by previous parties, picked up the disease, and then went about spreading it, themselves. People in good spirits in the morning could be in agony by noon and dead by evening. Symptoms started with a stomach ache that grew to intense pain within minutes. Then came diarrhea and vomiting that quickly dehydrated the victim. Within hours the skin was wrinkling and turning blue. If death did not occur within the first 12 to 24 hours, the victim usually recovered. One of this author's relatives, Martha Freel, came to Oregon in 1852. A letter sent home to an aunt in Iowa from Ash Hollow is now in my possession:

"First of all I would mention the sickness we have had and I am sorry to say the deaths. First of all Francis Freel died June 4, 1852, and Maria Freel followed the 6th, next came Polly Casner who died the 9th and LaFayette Freel soon followed, he died the 10th, Elizabeth Freel, wife of Amos [and Martha's mother] died the 11th, and her baby died the 17th. You see we have lost 7 persons in a few short days, all died of Cholera."

- Martha Freel, June 23, 1852

The cholera outbreak along the Oregon Trail was part of a worldwide pandemic which began in Bengal. Cities throughout the United States were struck, and the disease reached the overland emigrants by traveling up the Mississippi River from New Orleans. The epidemic thrived in the unsanitary conditions along the Trail, peaking in 1850 as it was stoked by the immense numbers of prospectors and would-be gold miners on the overland trails in 1849 and '50. Adults originating from Missouri seemed to be most vulnerable to the disease. Fortunately, it was prevalent on the Great Plains, and once past Fort Laramie, overlanders were largely safe from cholera at the higher elevations.

Accidents were caused by negligence, exhaustion, guns, animals, and the weather. Shootings were common, but murders were rare -- one usually shot oneself, a friend, or perhaps one of the draft animals when a gun discharged accidentally. Shootings, drownings, being crushed by wagon wheels, and injuries from handling domestic animals were the biggest accidental killers on the Trail. Any one of these four causes of death claimed more lives than were lost to sharp instruments, falling objects, rattlesnakes, buffalo hunts, hail, lightning, and other calamities.

Deaths along the trail, especially among young children and mothers in childbirth, were the most heart-rending of hardships:

"Mr. Harvey's young little boy Richard 8 years old went to git in the waggon and fel from the tung. The wheals run over him and mashed his head and Kil him Ston dead he never moved."

- Absolom Harden, 1847

Starvation often threatened emigrants, but it usually only killed their draft animals and thinned the herds they drove west:

"Counted 150 dead oxen. It is difficult to find a camping ground destitute of carcasses."

- J.G. Bruff, 1849

"Looked starvation in the face. I have seen men on passing an animal that has starved to death on the plains, stop and cut out a steak, roast and eat it and call it delicious."

- Clark Thompson, 1850

Patty Reed, eight year old member of the Donner-Reed Party of 1846 recalled how her mother "took the ox hide we had used for a roof and boiled it for us to eat" when the party was stranded by an early snowfall in the high Sierras. Thirty five members of the party died, and many of the 47 survivors ate their own dead.

Looking back from the Twentieth Century, it is clear that Indians were usually among the least of the emigrants' problems, though the overlanders certainly thought otherwise at the time. Tales of hostile encounters far overshadowed actual incidents, and relations between emigrants and Indians were further complicated by trigger-happy emigrants who shot at Indians for target practice. A few massacres were highly publicized, further reinforcing the myth. The Ward Train, for instance, was attacked by Shoshones who tortured and murdered nineteen emigrants. One boy escaped with an arrow in his side.

The Oregon Trail is this nation's longest graveyard. Over a 25 year span, up to 65,000 deaths occurred along the western overland emigrant trails. If evenly spaced along the length of the Oregon Trail, there would be a grave every 50 yards from Missouri to Oregon City. Medicine kits the pioneers carried to treat diseases and wounds included patent medicine "physicing" pills, castor oil, rum or whiskey, peppermint oil, quinine for malaria, hartshorn for snakebite, citric acid for scurvy, opium, laudanum, morphine, calomel, and tincture of camphor. It's a wonder that only one in every ten emigrants died along the way.

DISRUPTING THE NATIVES

White emigrants of the overland trail era are often credited with disrupting Native American societies, causing sweeping changes in their cultures, and precipitating wars. This is not entirely untrue, but the Oregon Trail was merely one chapter in a much longer history. The larger truth is that native lifestyles were disrupted by other Indians and by the arrival of Spanish horses well before the United States came into existence, wars and irreversible cultural changes were caused by government policies older than the Oregon Trail, and most contact between emigrants and Indians on the overland trails was peaceful.

Plains Indians were in a constant battle over homelands as migrating tribes shoved aside previous occupants, and the policies of the US government served only to further complicate this situation. In 1824, the Bureau of Indian Affairs was established -- not as an independent federal agency, but as a part of the War Department. During the Jackson presidency, a policy of Indian removal was implemented and the "five civilized tribes" of the northeast were forcibly relocated to the plains. As missionaries were moving to Oregon, the Cherokee Nation was following their Trail of Tears to Indian Territory.

Into this uncertainty came the covered wagons headed for Oregon and California. The emigrants distrusted and misunderstood the Indians, seeking revenge for any transgression, no matter how petty. Some emigrants actually shot at Indians for target practice, and guns always came out when Indians stopped by a pioneer encampment to trade. Minor skirmishes were labeled massacres in the press, and the number of dead grew with each retelling of the story at forts and trading posts across the West.

The first group of Indians encountered by emigrants headed west were the "civilized" tribes of the plains: the Fox, Sauk, Shawnee, and Potawatomi of the lower Missouri Valley. They readily learned English and assumed many customs of the whites. Passing the Methodist Shawnee Mission School, established in 1839 in Indian Territory just over the Missouri state line from Westport, marked the edge of white civilization.

Surrounding the "civilized" Indians were two groups of "friendlies," unassimilated but nonhostile tribes. One group included the Oto, Missouri, and Winnebago tribes. The other included the Omaha, Quapaw, Osage, Kansa (or Kaw), and Ponca Indians.

Upon reaching the Platte River basin, emigrants came into contact with the tribe believed to be the original (in historic times, at any rate) inhabitants of the Great Plains: the Pawnee. The four main tribes -- Grand, Noisy, Wolf, and Republican River -- were mainly farmers. Wars with the Sioux were gradually reducing their numbers, estimated by Lewis and Clark to be around 10,000. The cholera epidemic of 1849 killed perhaps half of those remaining. The Pawnee rarely fought with whites, and they were trusting enough to sell the Army a site for a new fort to protect the overlanders. The Union Pacific even hired them as guards against the Sioux.

The next group encountered were the Arapaho and Cheyenne. The Arapaho were religiously opposed to war. Closely associated with the Cheyenne, they were known for their friendliness and desire to trade. The Cheyenne were originally corn farmers from Minnesota but were forced to become buffalo-hunting nomads by the raiding Sioux. In 1840, the Arapaho and Cheyenne aligned with the Sioux, Kiowa, and Comanches against white settlement and the Pawnee, Shoshone, and Utes. They were guests of the Sioux when Custer and his men rode into battle at the Little Big Horn in 1876.

The Indians causing the most change on the Plains were those who called themselves Dakota (or Lakota or Nakota -- whites with different accents heard the Indian words differently). The Chippewa called them Naudewisious, the "snake" or "enemy," and French trappers shortened the name to Sioux. They had migrated to Nebraska and Wyoming by way of Manitoba and the Dakotas, and their arrival on the Great Plains precipitated a long period of warfare and skirmishing with the tribes they pushed aside. There were fourteen main Sioux tribes, of which the best known were the Oglala, Brule, Teton, Santee, Blackfoot, Hunkpapa, Miniconjou, and Two Kettle. Some Sioux farmed corn and augmented this with buffalo, game, and fish. Others were nomadic, moving entire villages seasonally. They were a powerful and proud people, and when pushed by settlers they responded with hostility. On August 9, 1854, along the Oregon Trail near Fort Laramie, the Grattan Massacre marked the start of a 36 year period of intermittent warfare between the United States Army and the Sioux tribes.

A highly respected leader of the Sioux during this period was Chief Red Cloud. In 1866, he demanded the abandonment of two forts along the Bozeman Trail. He was defeated after an attack on Fort Laramie. Chief Crazy Horse won infamy and immortality among whites when he led the Sioux against Colonel Custer and the 7th Cavalry along the Little Big Horn River. Custer's troops were wiped out. Word of the massacre reached the East Coast population centers on July 4, 1876,

and newspapers gave it front page coverage the following day -- the day after the United States of America celebrated its 100th birthday. The timing was a remarkable coincidence, and it surely contributed to the hostile attitude of many whites toward the Indians.

The final battle of the Sioux Indian War was at Wounded Knee on December 29, 1890. Younger braves had been dancing the Ghost Dance, a religious movement that preached invincibility and promised the return of the great buffalo herds that had been slaughtered by white hunters and settlers. Indian Agents, fearing another uprising, demanded the Sioux be rounded up and moved to Pine Ridge Reservation. Some 350 Miniconjou Sioux were surrounded by 500 soldiers of the reconstituted 7th US Cavalry, the same unit embarrassed at the Little Big Horn. The 120 men of the Sioux band were turning over their weapons when a rifle went off. The soldiers started shooting at anyone that moved, including women and children. They even used field artillery against the Indians, many of whom were unarmed. Over 300 Sioux were killed; 31 soldiers died in the crossfire. Congress, swept up in the hysteria of the times along with most everyone else, awarded several Medals of Honor to soldiers at Wounded Knee.

In 1973, Indian activists seized the site of Wounded Knee to publicize the plight of American Indians. Congress was asked to pay compensation to descendants and build a memorial to the fallen Sioux. Instead, the Indians got a statement of "deep regret" that the massacre had taken place.

West of the Rocky Mountains, emigrants on the Oregon Trail encountered several bands they knew as the Snake River Indians. These were the intermarried Shoshone and Bannocks. Related tribes encountered along the California Trail included the Paiute and Ute Indians. The Shoshone, in particular, were friendly to whites. Credit goes to Lewis and Clark for reuniting a Shoshone chief with his sister, their interpreter and guide, Sacajawea. The Shoshone assisted mountain men and Mormons alike. Chief Washakie was a friend of Jim Bridger, and he helped whites with safe passage and boasted that he had never killed a white person.

The same could not be said for the Bannocks. The Massacre Rocks Incident and the Ward Massacre are blamed on the Bannocks. The 1878 Bannock War was caused by a decrease in buffalo and loss of hunting land. It started with the arrest of two drunken Indians who'd taken potshots at teamsters along the Trail and ended when Chief Buffalo Horn was killed, possibly by members of his own tribe.

Farther down the Snake River, the emigrants encountered the Nez Perce, French for "pierced nose." Their contact with whites was entirely positive from the arrival of Lewis and Clark until the time that gold was discovered on their land. It was then determined by white authorities that the Nez Perce would be better off on a reservation. Young Chief Joseph, however, had promised his father he would never give up the Wallowa Valley.

When Joseph refused to accept transfer to a reservation in 1877, the Nez Perce War began. Joseph continually outwitted and embarrassed the Army in what is now a legendary campaign that is still studied by aspiring officers in armies around the world. When it became clear that the Army would accept neither defeat nor compromise, Joseph decided to take his people to Canada, beyond the

reach of American soldiers. Slowed down by women, children, and all of their possessions, they still kept ahead of the cavalry. They were captured only one day away from the border north of Yellowstone when the commander of the pursuing Army forces telegraphed ahead to another unit to cut them off. Joseph's surrender included the famous words, "I am tired of fighting. The little children are freezing to death. I am tired. My heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever."

From the crest of the Blue Mountains to the crest of the Cascades, the emigrants met the Cayuse, Walla Walla, Umatilla, Tenino, and Tygh Indians. Closely associated with, but not as friendly as the Nez Perce, they tolerated Oregon Trail traffic for the first few years. This ended when a measles epidemic at the Whitman Mission led to the killing of the Whitmans by Cayuse warriors in 1847 and the ensuing Cayuse War. The Cayuse were defeated by a volunteer army organized by the American Provisional Government and the British Hudson's Bay Company, and in 1851 they merged with the Nez Perce. In 1855 the Teninos, Wascos, Paiute, Tygh, and Klickitats merged into the new Warm Springs tribe. They held on to their traditional fishing rights along the Columbia River. Many pioneer diaries include references to looking down from the high cliffs to see Indians fishing for salmon at now-inundated Celilo Falls.

In the Willamette Valley itself, there were estimated to be over 5000 Chinook Indians of various tribes before the arrival of Euro-Americans. Most of the 800 Multnomah Indians were killed by a malaria epidemic caused by a single Swedish trading ship; the remainder were almost finished off by Methodist missionaries who unwittingly brought with them measles and smallpox, diseases to which the natives had no resistance. Other tribes suffered similar fates. By 1910 the Calapooya and Multnomah tribal groups were all but extinct, and there were fewer than 50 surviving Chinookans -- remnants of the Clackamas, Santiam, and Yamel (Yam Hill) tribes. These survivors were sent to the Grand Ronde Reservation. For some, the Oregon Trail was more disruptive than for others.

WOMEN ON THE TRAIL

It strikes me as I think of it now -- of course, I was a girl, too young then to know much about it -- but I think now the mothers on the road had to undergo more trial and suffering than anybody else. The men had a great deal of anxiety...but still, the mothers had the families.

- Martha Morrison Minto

Any discussion of the role of women on the Oregon Trail is, at its heart, a discussion of the role of mothers in frontier families. Though there were quite a few single men on the Oregon Trail, there were very few unattached women of marrying age, as what are now thought of as traditional (perhaps quaintly so) gender roles were very much mainstream in the United States of the mid-1800s: men were the breadwinners, while women were encouraged to marry a good provider and keep the house in order. On the frontier, the division between the sexes was perhaps best symbolized by the men working the fields and the women tending the dooryard garden. The men

were responsible for deciding what to plant in the fields that generated the family's income, while the women controlled the garden that the family depended on for greens, vegetables, and often medicinal plants needed to prepare folk remedies. Women also included ornamental flowers in their dooryard gardens -- believe it or not, in the mid-1800s dandelions were welcome additions to most lawns and gardens, as they reliably provided some of the first edible greens and colorful flowers every spring.

Women who wished to break out of their traditional roles faced cultural and legal frameworks which made it difficult for them to function independently: men voted on behalf of their families, controlled business relationships, and typically held sole title to the family farm (the Donation Land Act of 1850, which governed land claims in Oregon, was unusual in that it granted half the family claim to the husband and put the other half in the wife's name). Many women were never taught how to hitch up a team, saddle a horse, or drive a wagon -- and actually doing any such thing would have been considered unladylike in most social circles -- which meant that they couldn't readily attend church or get together for a social occasion without help. Thus, once the man of a family decided to pull up stakes and head for Oregon, the wife had little choice in the matter.

I am going with him, as there is no other alternative.

- Margaret Hereford Wilson

Some women had only a few weeks' notice that the family was moving to Oregon, while others had enough time to prepare as best they could. Once the husband's mind was made up, however, women were at best able to delay the journey to Oregon.

She begged Father to give up the notion but he could not. ... Mother finally reluctantly consented to go. ... Lovers, sweethearts, and associates were all left behind. ... The saddest parting of all was when my mother took leave of her aged and sorrowing mother, knowing full well that they would never meet again on earth.

- Martha G. Masterson

Not all women were against the idea of their families undertaking the journey to Oregon -- in fact, some shared their husbands' enthusiasm.

I was possessed with a spirit of adventure and a desire to see what was new and strange.

- Miriam Thompson Tuller

However, most women were, if not resistant, then certainly reluctant to leave behind the network of kinfolk and friends they had at home. In an era when railroads were still a new and almost blindingly fast means of transportation, frontier families typically remained rooted in place for years at a stretch. This was time enough to form lasting friendships and for the children in a neighborhood to grow up and intermarry, tying their families together in extended webs of kinship.

But if there is ever a time in a woman's life when she will endure hardships and make sunshine out of shadows it is when she first leaves the home nest to follow the man of her choice. ... I determined not to be a stumbling block at the threshold of our new life.

- Carrie Adell Strahorn

Sometimes extended families and groups of friends from the same county or town decided to emigrate to Oregon together, but most women on the Trail formed their own, temporary social circles out of necessity.

Mrs. P. is an exceedingly quiet appearing lady, and has an infant only four weeks old. I am determined to like her. ... We are much acquainted in five minutes as though we had known each other all our lives. The formalities of the drawing room are here out of place -- it is "How do you do?" with a hearty shake of the hand, sans ceremonie.

- Mrs. Benjamin Ferris

The traditional interpretation of the differing attitudes emigrants held about the journey holds that the men looked forward to their destination, the children thought life on the Oregon Trail was a grand adventure, and the women looked backwards, missing the security of the homes they had left behind. Though most modern historians prefer to avoid speaking in such generalizations, there is good evidence to support the broad truth of that one.

Well, well, this is not so romantic; thoughts will stray back (in spite of all our attempts to the contrary) to the comfortable homes we left and the question -- is this a good move? -- but echo answers not a word.

- Lucy Ide

I would make a brave effort to be cheerful and patient until the camp work was done. Then starting out ahead of the team and my men folks, when I thought I had gone beyond hearing distance, I would throw myself down on the unfriendly desert and give way like a child to sobs and tears, wishing myself back home with my friends and chiding myself for consenting to take this wild goose chase.

- Lavina Porter

Whether this reflects some fundamental biological or cultural difference between men, women, and children is another conversation entirely, but it was true that the women, much moreso than their husbands and children, remained strongly connected to the routines of life on the farm. Women were in charge of the domestic routines in camp just as they were back home, and they delegated what work they could to the elder children just as they did at home. While the Oregon Trail was an escape from chores such as making soap or tending the garden, chores such as cooking, cleaning, mending clothes, minding the little ones, and other "women's work" transferred readily to life on the Trail. More often than not, women had to perform these chores after walking all day long through

the dust and heat, and to make matters worse, there were any number of mundane challenges that nobody saw coming but which had to be faced every day.

All our work here requires stooping. Not having tables, chairs, or anything it is very hard on the back.

- Lodisa Frizzel

...one does like a change and about the only change we have from bread and bacon, is bacon and bread.

- Helen Carpenter

Had a rather disagreeable time getting supper. Our [buffalo] chips burn rather poor as they are so wet.

- Cecelia Adams

I have cooked so much out in the sun and smoke that I hardly know who I am and when I look into the little looking glass I ask, "Can this be me?"

- Miriam Davis

Keeping everyone fed while traveling the Oregon Trail was no small challenge in an age when the first step in preparing fried chicken might very well have been to wring the chicken's neck. Women coped by sharing time-saving tricks such as using the embers of the campfire to slow-cook a kettle of beans for breakfast the next day or filling the butter churn before hanging it off the back of the wagon, as a rough road would bounce the wagon around enough to churn a small lump of butter for the evening meal. In the face of the limited kitchen facilities and ingredients available on the emigrant road, many women took a certain pride in springing culinary surprises such as preparing a birthday cake or a batch of cookies. Some were so pleased with themselves that they almost bragged to their diaries of small triumphs in the face of adversity.

...wet up some light dough and rolled it out with a bottle and spread the strawberries over it and then rolled it up in a cloth and boiled it, and then with the juice of the strawberries and a little sugar and the last bit of nutmeg I had made quite a cup full of sauce to eat upon the dumplings... the dumplings were light as a cork and made quite a dessert.

- Mary Powers

All this, however, is not to say that women were unable to step out of their traditional roles when circumstances demanded it of them. Women on the Oregon Trail drove wagons, herded livestock, yoked oxen, and sometimes even took a turn at guard duty.

...when danger threatened and my services needed, I knew that if I couldn't shoot straight I could at least sound the alarm. ... I put on my husband's hat and overcoat, then grasping our old flintlock between my shaking hands I went forth into the darkness.

- Margaret Hecox

These times were generally not personal triumphs but concessions to necessity -- Margaret Hecox was forced to take a turn on sentry duty when her husband and many of the other men in her wagon train fell ill. When there was no emergency demanding their energies, women had quite enough to keep them busy within their usual, domestic spheres of responsibility.

In respect to women's work, the days are all the same, except when we stop... then there is washing to be done and light bread to make and all kinds of odd jobs. Some women have very little help about the camp, being obliged to get the wood and water... make camp fires, unpack at night and pack up in the morning -- and if they are Missourians they have milking to do if they are fortunate enough to have cows. I am lucky in having a Yankee husband and so am well waited on.

- Helen M. Carpenter

Indeed, not only did they not normally take on traditionally male roles, but women were typically the most active guardians of the cultural norms that defined "proper" women of the day.

While traveling, mother was particular about Louvina and me wearing sunbonnets and long mitts in order to protect our complexions, hair, and hands. Much of the time I should like to have gone without that long bonnet poking out over my face, but mother pointed out to me some girls who did not wear bonnets and as I did not want to look as they did, I stuck to my bonnet finally growing used to it.

- Adrietta Hixon

When we started from Iowa I wore a dark woolen dress which served me almost constantly during the whole trip. Never without an apron and a three-cornered kerchief, similar to those worn in those days, I presented a comfortable, neat appearance.

- Catherine Haun

For their part, men were reluctant to do anything that might be considered "women's work," though where, exactly, the line was drawn varied from one marriage to another.

When the first Saturday came round, I prepared to do some of my family laundry work. My husband... carried water... filled the washboiler and placed it over the open fire for me. Mrs. Norton was a deeply interested spectator... and remarked rather sadly, "The Yankee men are so good to their wives, they help 'em so much."

After that, I frequently noticed Mr. Norton's way of 'helping' his wife. He would stroll in leisurely, after his work of his lounging was over, look around critically, peer into the water bucket, and would

then call out loudly, in a tone that brooked no delay, "Mary Jane, I want some water! This bucket's empty!" And poor Mary Jane, weary and uncomplaining, would stop her dinner getting or put down her fretful baby and run... to the spring to 'fetch' water for her husband. Yet her husband was not unkind to her. It was just his way.

- Esther M. Lockhart

In this context, "unkind" is almost certainly a veiled reference to spousal abuse. Then, as now, some wives were subjected to physical and psychological abuse, but in the Nineteenth Century, beating one's wife (or husband, in some cases) was something which was not spoken of in public -- except, perhaps, in a moment of religious fervor. Such behavior was considered a private family matter and not often commented upon by emigrants in their diaries and journals.

While I'm writing I have an exciting experience. George is out on guard and in the next wagon behind ours a man and woman are quarreling. She wants to turn back and he wont go so she says she will go and leave him with the children and he will have a good time with that crying baby, then he used some very bad words and said he would put it out of the way. Just then I heard a muffled cry and a heavy thud as tho something was thrown against the wagon box and she said "Oh you've killed it" and he swore some more and told her to keep her mouth shut or he would give her more of the same. Just then the word came, change guards. George came in and Mr. Kitridge went out so he and his wife were parted for the night. The baby was not killed. I write this to show how easy we can be deceived.

- Keturah Belknap

Under the stresses of the months-long journey to Oregon, domestic violence sometimes took on bizarre dimensions.

This morning one company moved on except one family. The woman got mad and would not budge, nor let the children go. He had his cattle hitched on for three hours and coaxing her to go, but she would not stir. I told my husband the circumstance, and Adam Polk and Mr. Kimball went and took each one a young one and crammed them in the wagon and her husband drive off and left her sitting. She got up, took the back track and traveled out of sight. Cut across, overtook her husband. Meantime he sent his boy back to camp after a horse that he had left and when she came up to her husband, says, "Did you meet John?"

"Yes," was the reply, "and I picked up a stone and knocked out his brains."

Her husband went back to ascertain the truth, and while he was gone, she set one of his wagon on fire, which was loaded with store goods. The cover burnt off, and some valuable articles. He saw the flames and came running and put it out, and then mustered spunk enough to give her a good flogging.

- Elizabeth Dixon Smith Geer

That incident aside, women generally bore up to the difficulties of the journey as well as, or perhaps even a bit better than, the menfolk.

One day I walked fourteen miles and was not very fatigued. The men seemed more tired and hungry than were the women.

- Catherine Haun

Married women in the Nineteenth Century were expected to, and indeed many routinely did, put the welfare of their families above their own well being, tending to the sick and injured even when they were, themselves, unwell. This perhaps fortified them to cope with the trials and tribulations of the journey to Oregon -- not that they had any better idea of how to deal with unfamiliar situations than the men did, but women were accustomed to being a family's last line of defense against misfortune. However, some women, already enfeebled by illness, malnutrition, or exhaustion, were overwhelmed and ultimately worked themselves to death.

Mother soon discovered that she was not strong enough for the duties that now devolved upon her. She decided to get along as she could with the Doctor's help, and keep one of the boys with the wagon until she got to Fort Hall. She would there exchange her stock for horses, and pack into the station and winter there. But already had she begun to sink under her sorrow and the accumulation of cares... Consumed with fever and afflicted with the sore mouth that was the forerunner of the fatal camp fever, she refused to give up, but fought bravely against the disease and weakness for the sake of her children.

- Catherine Sager

Knowing they would have to find the strength to go on if all else failed, women were more highly aware of and concerned about the risks their families were running by emigrating to Oregon than were the men and children. Both men and women sometimes counted graves along the Trail, either out of boredom or morbid curiosity, but for the most part, only women admitted to reflecting on what they saw.

On the afternoon we passed a lonely nameless grave on the prairie. It had a headboard. It called up a sad train of thoughts. To my mind it seems so sad to think of being buried and left alone in so wild a country with no one to plant a flower or shed a tear over one's grave.

- Jane Gould

Some women were plagued by nightmares and daydreams about dangers, real or imagined, along the Oregon Trail.

I have... dreamed of being attacked by wolves and bears. ...the heart has a thousand misgivings and the mind is tortured with anxiety and often as I passed the fresh made graves I have glanced at the side boards of the wagon not knowing how soon it might serve as a coffin for some one of us.

- Lodisa Frizzel

However, the truth is that nine out of ten emigrants made it safely to Oregon. Most of the women who set out on the Oregon Trail survived to help their families put down roots in the West, but not many of them were happy about it, at least to begin with. The emigrants, it should be recalled, usually set out in April or May and arrived in October or November -- just as the winter rains were setting in. Thus, their first impressions of Oregon were affected by the gray, damp days of wintertime in the Willamette Valley. Perhaps suffering from seasonal depression on top of everything else, a significant minority of emigrants probably would have turned right around and started back home if their wagons and oxen had been in any shape to travel.

My most vivid recollection of that first winter in Oregon is of the weeping skies and of Mother and me also weeping. I was homesick for my schoolmates in Chicago and I thought I would die. We knew no one in Portland. We had no use for Portland, nor for Oregon, and were convinced that we never would care for it.

- Marilla Washburn Bailey

Given some time to adjust, though, most of the emigrants ended up well pleased with their new homes.

When the snow was three or four feet deep in Wisconsin, I picked wild flowers in Oregon. Everything around me, so far as nature was concerned, was charming to behold.

- Emeline T. Fuller

OREGON TRAIL MILEPOSTS

'Three days' travel out of Independence, the untried, greenhorn Oregon Trail pioneers came upon a hill rising from the flat grassland around it. Blue Mound seemed strangely out of place in the midst of the prairie. Eager emigrants climbed it to get a look at what lay ahead. Officers and guides urging the parties to move on allowed the curious only a quick glance.

As the wagon trains crossed Kansas and Nebraska, the mileposts were obstacles in the form of rivers that had to be crossed: the Blue, Wakarusa, Kansas, Vermilion, Big Blue, and Little Blue. Steep banks and high water during May were common problems. Some rivers could be forded, but for rivers deeper than four feet or so, a pair of canoes would be lashed together, a wagon rolled on crossways, and the resulting ferry poled across. Some smaller creeks had toll bridges built by entrepreneurs hoping to cash in on the emigrant traffic.

Dotting the length of the Trail from Missouri to Oregon are numerous springs with names of explorers, descriptive names such as Cold or Cottonwood, or names reflecting pioneer determination such as Faith or Charity. Alcove Springs has a twelve-foot fall of water that provided

much-needed relief for man and beast. The Donner Party carved the words Alcove Springs in eight inch letters on a nearby rock that could be read for over a century (recent travelers report that part of the inscription has broken away from the rock face, apparently through natural weathering). Two days away at Fremont Springs, similar graffiti can be seen displaying the names of 1842 scouts John C. Fremont and Kit Carson.

Later emigrants saw Pony Express stations and stagecoach stops about every fifteen miles from Hollenberg's Ranch House to Fort Bridger. The first one, Hollenberg's, was built in 1857 and is the only one left today in its more-or-less original state. Rock Creek Station in Nebraska was the site of the 1861 shootout involving David McCanles and James Butler Hickok, which gave Hickok his "Wild Bill" reputation.

Where the Oregon Trail out of Independence met the Platte River, the first of many forts was built to protect plains emigrants. Forts operated by the US Army usually had post offices where emigrants could send home letters, and eastbound riders headed back to the United States were sometimes willing to take along letters from westbound emigrants. The Platte River itself was another major obstacle, as in June it consisted mostly of shallow, stagnant pools separated by mud flats, sandbars, and a three foot deep main channel that meandered from bank to bank. It was too wide to be bridged and too shallow to for a ferry. Crossing the Platte from the northern Council Bluffs Road (the Mormon Trail) to the Oregon Trail on the Platte's south shore required a risky trek following a path of willow poles set out to mark stable sandbars that would support the weight of wagon.

The Oregon Trail had to eventually cross the South Platte River to gain access to the North Platte River, which overlanders followed all the way to the area of present-day Casper, Wyoming. This was done at California Crossing, named for the gold rushers of 1849. Before then it had been known as Brule Crossing. The Pony Express used another crossing twenty miles upstream and also called it California Crossing, so the Oregon Trail ford became known as the Old or Lower California Crossing.

Once across the South Platte, there was a steep grade as the Trail climbed up California Hill to a high plateau. Deep ruts are still visible there today. Then it was back down the other side on Windlass Hill, so named because it seemed impossible to descend safely without the aid of a windlass (legend has it that there actually was a windlass set up there for a time, but there is no evidence to support this). All available men and women held on to ropes to slow wagons making the descent.

At the bottom was Ash Hollow on the North Platte River, a sylvan glade with clean, cool springs which served as an oasis for the weary adventurers who had just struggled down from atop Windlass Hill. In her journal entry for June 5, 1852, Esther Belle Hanna described the great profusion of wild roses in full bloom to be found there.

Along the banks of the North Platte River is a profusion of massive sandstone features rising majestically from the plains. The first, Courthouse and Jail Rocks, could be seen for forty miles or three days away. Next came Chimney Rock. For two days before arriving its solitary finger looked

like "an old ruin, then a very sharp cone, more the shape of a chimney than anything else." (A.J. McCall, June 13, 1849) Scotts Bluff was named for fur trapper Hiram Scott, who was purportedly abandoned for dead sixty miles away and crawled to that spot to die. The legend is retold in many emigrant diaries, the overlanders having heard it at local trading posts and forts.

The emigrants passed several fur trading posts beyond Scotts Bluff. The oldest, dating back to 1834, was William Sublette's post at LaRemay's River, later called Fort Laramie. Beyond Fort Laramie, Oregon Trail pioneers crossed a number of rivers flowing out of what the emigrants called the Black Hills, today known as the Laramie Mountains. There were crossings of the Laramie River, Horse, Cottonwood, LaBonte, Box Elder, and Deer Creeks, the North Platte itself, and as many as nine crossings of the Sweetwater River. Many of these crossings were made with the benefit of ferries or bridges. Most of the streams were clear-flowing water up to 100 yards wide with banks littered with driftwood.

Emigrant diaries mention several prominent landmarks beyond Fort Laramie. One was Register Cliff, a soft sandstone formation that served as a message board for the emigrants. One interesting section of the cliff is that claimed by the Unthank family. Above the other names is written "A.H. Unthank, 1850" -- the family patriarch, Alva inscribed his name just one week before dying of cholera. Below it is "O.N. Unthank, 1869," Alva's nephew. Below them is "O.B. Unthank, 1931," Alva's great-grandson.

Farther up the trail are the spectacular ruts at Guernsey, Wyoming. The Oregon Trail at this point had to go over more soft sandstone, and the wagon wheels gradually carved a depression five feet deep. Nearby is the grave of Joel Hembree, a six year old boy with the Applegate company who was killed July 18, 1843, when he fell under a wagon. This is believed to be the oldest marked grave on the Oregon Trail, and it was seen by all who followed.

The abundance of grass next to Independence Rock made it a welcome stopping point for every train. The goal was to arrive here by the 4th of July to be sure of beating the winter snows to Oregon. Independence Rock is a large, low granite mass resembling a giant turtle and covering about five acres of prairie. It is the most often noted landmark west of Fort Laramie. Emigrants found many fur trappers' names already drawn on the rock and added their own names. Axle grease made of pine tar and hog fat was used to paint some names, and a handful are still visible in sheltered nooks and crannies. Some emigrants carved their names, dates, or initials, but this was much harder work than doing so in the sandstone of Register Cliff. The Mormons, in one of their many entrepreneurial ventures, had men who would inscribe names for up to five dollars each. In 1860 Sir Richard Burton calculated that there were between forty and fifty thousand names written in one way or another on Independence Rock.

Within sight of Independence Rock is Devil's Gate, where the Sweetwater River shoots through a crack in the granite. The Trail went around the feature, as it was entirely too narrow and steep-sided to allow a wagon road to be blazed, but emigrants would stop and climb to the top to peer over the edge. At least one young overlander fell to her death doing just that.

The next milepost was Ice Slough, a shallow basin at the 6000 foot level just before South Pass. Ponds and springs here were covered with turf. Ice from the previous winter was insulated under the turf and could be dug out during the hot summer months. The surface water was alkaline, but the ice was clear and good: "We dug down in the earth about 12 inches, and found chinks of ice. We carried it along till about noon, and made some lemonade for dinner. It relished first rate." (George Belshaw, July 4, 1853)

South Pass marks the halfway point of the Oregon Trail, a powerful symbolic landmark that lacked any distinguishing feature which we would actually think of as a landmark. Here, the emigrants crossed the Continental Divide and the eastern boundary of Oregon Territory. Before 1849, it was at this point that emigrants left the territory controlled (more or less) by the United States.

Expecting a narrow alpine pass, emigrants were surprised by the gradual approach leading to a broad, flat plain some twenty miles wide. The descent was steeper, but still not a bad stretch of road. About 3 miles into the plain is Pacific Springs, a marshy prairie bog fed by springs which was distinguished solely by being the first body of water the pioneers encountered that drained into the Pacific Ocean.

Most river crossings in Wyoming were difficult due to the considerable amount of snowmelt in July and August. The emigrants always arrived during this period of high water and had to cross rivers on submerged gravel bars -- a risky proposition at best. Straying from the marked course by even a few feet could mean disaster for people, wagons, and livestock. A ferry was eventually established at the Green River crossing, but other crossings remained dangerous.

Fort Bridger was a palisaded trading post and blacksmith shop established in 1842 by Jim Bridger and Louis Vasquez to capitalize on the overland trade and the need for blacksmithing services. Worn out animals could often be exchanged there for fresher ones.

Sublette's Cutoff was a fifty mile trek across desolate, hostile land that cut 46 miles, or about 3 days, off the journey. The waterless landscape crossed by Sublette's Cutoff was arguably the worst stretch of the Trail. Not popular until the gold rush of 1849, it called for a decision whether to save time or risk the death of animals. Some emigrants chose to travel the Cutoff by night, breaking camp at 2 AM and navigating by "head lights" -- lanterns carried by boys walking ahead of the wagons. Day or night, the wagons stirred up gritty, alkaline dust, and they generally traveled side by side in a broad front up to a mile across in order to avoid each other's dust.

Heading northwest towards the Snake River, the Oregon Trail emigrants passed through the lava lands, an otherworldly landscape dotted by cones, craters, springs, geysers, and waterfalls. Steamboat Springs, the principal feature of a group of mineral springs collectively known as Soda Springs, was a three-foot geyser that emitted a high-pitched whistle that reminded emigrants of the steamboats they had seen or ridden on the Missouri River. The area has been geologically active since before recorded human history, and some of the springs ran hot, others warm or cold. Some were white in color, others gray, buff, or red. Some tasted to the pioneers like soda water, others like metal or beer. One minister proclaimed that, "Hell is not more than a mile from this place."

Now traveling in territory worked by the early fur trappers and mountain men, the emigrants arrived at forts older than the Trail itself. Fort Hall was established by Nathaniel Wyeth in 1834 and later sold to the Hudson's Bay Company. After Oregon became a United States Territory in 1849, the HBC departed and the post served the emigrant trade exclusively. Many emigrants here tasted Pacific salmon for the first time.

The Snake River flows through the bottom of a deep chasm, and it was all but inaccessible to the emigrants much of the time. The rumble of American Falls, Shoshone Falls, and Twin Falls could be heard for miles. At Thousand Springs, a series of streams burst out from under the lava rimrock into the Snake River. Since these falls were on the other side of the river, this landmark was only of interest to the pioneers as a milepost.

The Snake River briefly escaped from its high walls at what is today known as Three Island Crossing, allowing parched wagon trains a chance to cross to the north side and travel to the lush, green Boise River Valley. During the pioneer era, there were only two islands at the crossing; the third was formed years later when the river scoured out a new channel during a flood. The river was six to eight feet deep, but its clarity was deceptive, making it appear shallower. Combined with its swift current, this was generally considered the most treacherous river crossing on the entire Trail. Guidebooks went into great detail on how to use the two islands to avoid mishaps. Still, wagons capsized and men and animals drowned. Many emigrants chose an alternate route, staying on the dry south bank of the Snake rather than risk fording the river.

Beyond Fort Boise (and after 1859) the Oregon Trail entered the State of Oregon. Past Farewell Bend, where the overlanders left the Snake River behind, the next milepost was the Blue Mountains. This heavily timbered expanse was full of steep grades that tried the weary emigrants and their animals. Many overlanders recorded their astonishment at the sight of 200 foot tall trees. From the crest could be seen the great volcanoes of the Cascade range. Nights in the Blue Mountains are often chilly in late August and September, and the cool, alpine nights reminded the emigrants that the mountains ahead were even higher.

For five years, this stretch of the Trail went past the Whitman Mission. The mission provided food, medical attention, and blacksmithing services. Following the November 29, 1847, murders of the Whitmans, the mission closed down and was bypassed, shaving a few miles off the journey. At Fort Walla Walla, needy emigrants could often travel to Fort Vancouver in HBC boats.

Several tributaries of the Columbia River had to be crossed between the Blues and the Cascades. The Umatilla River was crossed at Echo, where emigrants saw the first frame house since leaving Missouri. The John Day River had a swift current and a solid bed of round stones. The Deschutes River was a difficult ford until a ferry was established.

The Dalles was the terminus of overland traffic in the earliest years of the Oregon Trail. Starting in 1846, the Barlow Road was open, allowing wagons to skirt the south shoulder of Mount Hood before descending into the Willamette Valley from the east. Emigrants taking the Columbia River route from The Dalles stopped over at Fort Vancouver, the Hudson's Bay Company trading post

and regional headquarters established in 1825. For many emigrants it was here, for the first time since Missouri, that they ate at a table or slept in a house.

The end of the Oregon Trail was Oregon City, not quite 2000 miles from Independence. Those arriving by river landed near Governor George Abernethy's house and proceeded to Abernethy Green, a large meadow behind Abernethy's house. The Barlow Road travelers entered Abernethy Green from the east. Here was the final campground.